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ABSTRACT

The impact of a departmental honors program in psychology was evaluated at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte. Attention was focused on the impact of the introductory honors course on students' academic performance and adjustment. Students were selected for the honors program based on predicted grade point average, which was based on four variables: high school rank, verbal and math Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores, and race. Data were collected initially and up to 2 years after the course to determine short- and long-term effects. Students' responses to a questionnaire were compared to those of a control group matched for academic ability. In addition, faculty completed an open-ended questionnaire to evaluate the honor class. It was found that honors students had higher grade point averages, enjoyed their classes more than did nonhonors students, and were much more likely to double major (33 vs. 4 percent) than were nonhonors students. Honors students also indicated that their coursework had a greater impact on their future career choices and their studies were much more experiential in content, compared to the work of nonhonors students. The student questionnaire is appended. (SW)

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Assessment of the Impact of an Introductory Honors Psychology Course on Students: Initial and Delayed Effects

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Running Head: Effect of Honors Psychology Course

Abstract

In 1980, the Psychology Department at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte initiated an honors program in Psychology for undergraduates. A detailed assessment of the impact of the initial Introductory Honors Psychology course on student's academic performance and adjustment was conducted. Data were collected initially and up to two years after the course was completed so that short term and long term effects could be assessed. Students' responses to the questionnaires were compared to a control group matched for academic ability. The major findings reported were that honors students had higher grade points, enjoyed their classes more than nonhonors students and were much more likely to double major (33% vs. 4%) than nonhonors students.

Assessment of the Impact of an Introductory Honors Psychology Course on Students: Initial and Delayed Effects

In the Fall of 1980, the Psychology Department at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte began an honors program open to both majors and nonmajors. The primary purpose of the program was to provide a small group of academically-talented students with an opportunity to pursue a more in-depth study of psychology than was generally available in non-honors psychology courses. During the past three years, the Department has offered an honors section of Introductory Psychology each fall and an assortment of upper level courses in both spring and fall which have included child, abnormal, social, research methods, and history and systems. The classes are typically small, ranging in size from eight to 25 students and the courses emphasize close faculty-student contact, individualized programs of study, and we hope to enhance camaraderie between our most talented students. The Psychology Honors Program is integrated with a broader University Honors Program which provides students with opportunities for special lectures, off-campus trips, undergraduate honors thesis supervision and access to an undergraduate honors lounge.

We were interested in assessing the impact of the departmental honors program, and decided to examine closely the students admitted to the Honors Introductory Psychology course. The most elaborate selection techniques were used for this group and they were also the most diverse,

as the group consisted largely of nonmajors in psychology. Data regarding student selection, student demographics, teacher and student evaluation and satisfaction as well as follow-up indices of program impact were collected. The results reported in this article provide a model for a comprehensive evaluation of an entire honors program in psychology, as well as support the positive impact of the Honors Introductory course. A control group of non-honors students displaying similar academic ability to the honors sample was employed as a comparison sample in a two-year follow-up evaluation. This group made possible a meaningful assessment of our program's impact over a significant period of time.

There is little systematic behavioral research on the effects of honors programs in general, and virtually none regarding the effects of a psychology honors course in particular. Studies have indicated that honors students have a higher need to achieve than nonhonors students (Hickson & Driskill, 1970). A five-year follow-up study indicated that women who were home economics majors in college and completed an honors program were more career-oriented than nonhonors women and more were planning to work after having children (Metzger, Bollman, Hoeflin, & Schmalzried, 1969). Finally, Kell and Kennedy (1961) reported that honors freshman women had stronger aesthetic values than nonhonors women as freshmen but these differences disappeared by the junior year.

Method

Student Selection. Individuals selected for admission to the freshman honors course in introductory psychology were chosen based on

their predicted grade point average (P-GPA). The P-GPA was obtained from the multiple regression equation developed by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) for use by our college of Arts & Sciences. The prediction is based on four variables: high school rank, SAT verbal, SAT math and race. The prediction equation had a multiple regression coefficient of .647 with high school rank, SAT verbal, SAT math and race contributing .41, .32, .09 and .18 respective proportions of variance to the P-GPA. Based on the P-GPA we selected the top 150 entering freshmen and sent them letters asking if they would like to apply for admission to a special honors course offered in psychology. The final screening which yielded approximately 30 students was completed by a committee review of each applicant's academic credentials accompanied by a short essay each student was asked to write on "Why I want to be in honors psychology." The committee also attempted to create a favorable mix of different declared majors to enhance stimulating classroom discussion. Each year between 15 and 25 students finally enrolled in our honors introduction sections. Attrition from our initial group of 30 was most often caused by students choosing not to attend our university.

Data Collection or Evaluation Procedures. For each individual selected for admission to the honors program several demographic and academic indices were obtained. Table 1 displays a list of some of the student characteristics collected. Table 1 also shows these data for a control group of students of a similar academic caliber. These students were invited to apply to participate in the Introductory course and chose

not to pursue an application. The academic indices displayed in Table 1 were obtained by permission from student files. Honors students completed questionnaires and open-ended evaluations of the honors class at the end of the semester as well as follow-up evaluations at the end of a one or two year period after the class ended. The control group also completed a modified follow-up evaluation. For all students, the follow-up evaluations were solicited by mail. Information requested in the follow-up evaluations is displayed in Table 2. Faculty were also asked to evaluate the honors class by means of an open ended questionnaire. Finally, follow-up academic indices were obtained by permission from the registrar's office for both honors and control student groups.

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

Results and Discussion

The results of primary interest concerned the impact of the honors course on student participants. Several of the indices aimed at assessing the program's effect revealed very positive results. First, our index of academic achievement, assessed by overall grade point average (GPA), indicated that the honors students obtained significantly higher GPAs than the control group, ($t(90) = 3.07$, $p < .005$) even though the control group initially had a slightly, though not significantly higher P-GPA than the honors group. We are, of course, aware that since

the group was self-selecting (i.e., same students chose to be in and others not to be in the honors course), that this selection factor may have been responsible for some of the effects. However, some of the effects, at least, were of sufficient magnitude that it would appear to be unreasonable to attribute them wholly to the stable characteristics of students initially attracted to the course.

Further support for the apparently positive impact of the honors course was derived from the follow-up questionnaire mailed to both honors students and control students one and two years after completion of their freshman year. The questionnaire was a modified version of that suggested by the National Collegiate Honors Council (19) and contained 20 Likert type scale questions (Likert, 1939) assessing satisfaction with social, and academic adjustment to college, as well as satisfaction with completed course work. The return rate of the questionnaire was reasonably high with 36 of the 44 honors students responding (%) and 32 of 55 control students responding (%). Multivariate analysis of variance indicated that the honors group differed significantly from the control group ($F = p < .01$). Simple effects analyses of each question revealed the following major group differences. The honors students responded with answers indicating significantly more satisfaction with their social ($t(66) = 2.85$, $p < .01$) and academic life ($t(66) = 2.91$, $p < .01$) than the controls. Honors students also indicated that their course work had a greater impact on their future career choices ($t(66) = 3.51$, $p < .01$) and was much more experiential in content ($t(66) = 3.81$, $p < .01$).

It is also interesting to note here that the honors students indicated that they enjoyed all of their classes more than the non-honors students ($t(66) = 2.77$, $p < .01$), and by comment often attributed this to what they had gained in their honors classes. A final result of interest along this line concerned the chosen college majors of both honors and control students as indicated on the follow-up survey. Thirty-three percent of the honors students were double majoring at the time of the follow-up survey compared to four percent of the control students. It appears as though in the pursuit of depth, honors courses had developed an appreciation for a breadth of knowledge.

One result not directly related to program impact, but nonetheless of value concerned the efficiency of using the P-GPA as an admission criteria to freshman honors courses. During the two years of data collection reported here, only two students were not asked to continue on with honors work at the university. These two students had the lowest P-GPA of all those admitted to the program. Consistent with this, we found that P-GPA correlated .56 with overall achieved grade point average within the honors group. This is an especially impressive correlation when one considers the highly restricted range associated with this sample. Other predictors of college achievement also revealed rather high correlations within the honors students. These included high school rank, .41; SAT math, .39; and SAT-verbal, .31.

Though no quantitative analyses were applied to the course evaluations, the open-ended evaluations completed by faculty who taught

honors classes were overwhelmingly positive as were the teacher evaluations completed by students enrolled in honors classes.

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Table 1

Student Characteristics	N = 33 Honors Students	N = 41 Control Students
Predicted Grade Point Average (A=4.0)	3.39	3.44
Percent Males	21	29
Percent Females	79	71
Age at Entry	18.0	17.9
SAT-verbal	535	541
SAT-math	556	550
H.S. rank	7	9
Mother's education (years)	13.6	13.1
Father's education (years)	14.1	13.9

Table 2

Please answer the following questions and return this form in the enclosed envelope. Do not indicate your name anywhere on the form. Leave any questions blank which you feel do not pertain to you.

1. Major(s) _____; _____

2. Are you satisfied with your experiences at college thus far?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all			Moderately			Very much

3. Has your social adjustment to college life been satisfactory?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all			Moderately			Very much

4. Has your adjustment to the academic component of college life been satisfactory?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all			Moderately			Very much

5. Have your career goals changed any since you first enrolled in college?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all			Moderately			Very much

6. What is your present overall grade point average? _____

7. Did you take any honors courses at UNCC? ___yes; ___ no.

If your answer to the above question was yes, answer the following questions.

8. Did you find your honors classes to be different from your other classes?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all			Moderately			Very much

9. How many honors classes have you taken? _____

10. Were you satisfied with the experiences in the honors class you took?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all			Moderately			Very much

11. Would you recommend honors classes to your friends?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Never			Possibly			Definitely

12. Please use the space on the reverse side for any additional comments.

Footnotes

This research was supported by a National Science Foundation LOCI grant to the first and second authors jointly. Requests for reprints should be sent to the first author, Department of Psychology, The University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, NC 28223.